DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 811 CG 026 402

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TITLE A Prevention Program for Middle-School High Risk Youth.
PUB DATE Oct 94
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Educational Research Association (Ellenville, NY, October 26-28, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Compensatory Education; Educationally Disadvantaged; Grade 7; Helping Relationship; *High Risk Students; Junior High Schools; Junior High School Students; *Mentors; Middle Schools; Parent Participation; Pretests Posttests; Prevention; Self Esteem; *Substance Abuse; Teacher Student Relationship; Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Middle School Students; *New York (Nassau County)

ABSTRACT

A 5-year federally funded substance abuse prevention program targeted 426 high risk middle-school youth from 4 school districts in Nassau County, New York. Combining a child-centered model with a systemic approach, the program's goal was to prevent or delay the onset of alcohol and other drug use. High-risk youth were identified by school counselors, administrators, and teachers based on indicators such as: discrepancy between ability and performance, excessive absence, and history of behavior problems. A cluster of 8 to 10 high risk grade seven students interacted daily with a teacher-mentor throughout their middle school experience. Program initiatives sought to: (1) increase skills of mentors in four middle schools; (2) increase parental involvement; (3) improve youths' self esteem, relationships, and drug, alcohol, and tobacco refusal skills; and (4) strengthen youths' study skills and academic achievement. A pretest-posttest comparison group evaluation found positive outcomes. The teacher-mentor component was the program's major strength. Future studies should focus greater emphasis on qualitative evaluation useful in documenting some of the real but elusive changes which were not captured by the quantitative data. (JBJ)

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A Prevention Program for Middle-School High Risk Youth

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Abstract

A five-year federally-funded substance abuse prevention program targeted high risk middle-school youth. The program sought to (a) increase skills of mentors in four middle schools, (b) increase parental involvement, (c) improve youths' self esteem, relationships, and drug, alcohol, and tobacco refusal skills, and (d) strengthen youths' study skills and academic achievement. A pretest-posttest comparison group evaluation design found positive outcomes. The teacher-mentor component was the program's major strength.

Paper presented at the October 1994 conference of the Northeastern Educational Research Association (NERA) in Ellenville, NY.

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Background

Evidence exists that academic failure and dropping out of school have multiple "nested' causes and therefore need multiple solutions (Grant Foundation Commission, 1988; Mann, 1987). Although accumulated knowledge may be sufficient to make changes in schools and classrooms, knowing how to combine the right combination of people, things, and ideas to support at-risk students and the adults that work with them appears to remain out of reach (Cuban, 1989).

While early intervention and intervention at the high school level have long been recognized as critical for economically disadvantaged students (Rumberger, 1987), a need for intervention at the middle school level has been only recently highlighted (Mann, 1987).

An assessment of Nassau County's fifty-six local school districts found that districts offering student counseling or personal growth programs indicated great need for self esteem and social skills training, training in how to cope with peer pressure, training in effective communication, and on-site counseling (Gittman, 1989).

In response to the identified need, Nassau BOCES developed a demonstration program which sought to effect change by linking people, ideas, and resources in a unique way. Combining a child-centered model with a systemic approach, the program's goal was to prevent or delay the onset of alcohol and other drug (AOD) use among high-risk youth.

At the level of the individual student and the school, a cluster of groups of eight to ten high risk grade 7 students interacted daily with a teacher-mentor throughout their middle school experience. The mentor program addressed individual causes for dropping out of school including chronic academic failure, low self esteem, and a perception that the student did not control his or her future (Wehlage, 1987). Mentors were trained in group dynamics, self esteem development, and problem-solving techniques. Family participation in program activities, both in school at in the home, was actively sought.

At a systemic level, two related partnerships enhanced educational and social services delivery to the targeted youth. A school-university partnership was designed to increase high risk youths' opportunity to remain in high school by developing their knowledge regarding the impact of drug use, improving their ability to resist drug use, and developing their study and academic skills. This partnership - between the Board of Cooperative Services of Nassau County (Nassau BOCES) and the C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University (C.W.Post/LIU) - provided university expertise in developing curriculum guides in health,

language arts, and social studies which integrated drug-prevention education with strategic teaching and learning strategies; educated 300 pre-service teachers in multicultural education; and allowed opportunity for trained pre-service teachers to tutor the targeted youth in study skills. Through the school-university partnership, the high risk youth participated in a three-day college residency experience consisting of educational, social, and recreational activities. Scheduled immediately following a week-long Nassau BOCES summer environmental education program which incorporated problemsolving and cooperative activities designed to address and overcome fears and anxieties regarding challenge, the college residency experience was particularly meaningful as it culminated a year of growth and bonding - and also set the groundwork for the year to come.

A second partnership existed between Nassau BOCES, four public school districts, families of the targeted youth, and a network of social service delivery agencies in Nassau County. Nassau BOCES was the lead agency in this program which was funded in 1989 by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention of the Department of Health and Human Services. Four school districts - Freeport, Hempstead, Roosevelt, and Westbury - each participated in the program by identifying high risk youth to be served, and supporting teacher-mentors and middle-school building administrators in their continuing involvement in this five-year demonstration program. The community-based social service delivery agencies worked with Nassau BOCES and the four local school districts to provide needed family services and individual interventions.

Sample

The target population consisted of 426 middle-school youth whose elementary school histories indicated high risk for alcohol and drug abuse, academic failure, and school dropout. Ninety-five percent of these youth were African-American.

School counselors, administrators, and teachers referred youngsters in grades six and seven to the program based upon their performance in elementary school. Referral indicators included discrepancy between ability and performance, excessive absence, and history of behavior problems. Some youngsters had cognitive problems; others had personality problems. All students who were accepted as program participants, however, were considered "regular" students - they were not involved in ESL, special education, or other services targeting unique populations.

Mentors of program participants noted - after these youth had already been participating in the program - that the students typically performed below their abilities, neglected assignments, exhibited disruptive behaviors, and manifested high rates of absenteeism. Academic achievement lagged behind the norm for students countywide.

The following list of behaviors describes mentors' observations of the seven most frequently occurring behaviors that were exhibited by the targeted youth:

- Negative attitudes towards school, schoolwork, incomplete assignments, poor grades;
- Absent from group meetings;
- Inappropriate, disruptive, silly behaviors in class;
- Excessive absence from school or cutting class;
- Evident lack of cognitive skills, slow in comprehending cognitive material;
- Verbally or physically abusive with peers; and
- Verbally or physically abusive with teachers or other adults.

School staff estimated that 15 percent of the youth used alcohol and other drugs, and 85 percent were exposed to the their sale and use.

Dependence on public assistance was estimated at 10 percent in one participating district, 30 percent in a second, and 40 percent each in the remaining two districts. The proportions of children who were eligible for free lunch ranged from one-third in one district to four-fifths in another.

In 1992-93, nearly one-half of participating youth were from single-parent families, slightly more than one-third of the youngsters lived with intact families, and the remaining one-fifth lived with their grandmothers or with foster families. Godparents, aunts, and cousins often assumed responsibility for children in the extended family. Several generations of family members commonly rented or purchased a single-family home and shared expenses. Homeowners commonly rented rooms to friends or relatives.

Whereas education was valued as a vehicle for improving one's circumstances, families believed that schools were hostile to minorities and responsible for reinforcing negative stereotypes. Completing high school was regarded as a major achievement by these families. College was not viewed as a viable option.

Methods

Evaluation tasks included collecting data from school records, developing and administering questionnaires and interviews, observing meetings and activities, and leading focus groups.

Sources of formative evaluation data included questionnaires to assess mentor training needs and training workshops, perceptions of program implementation, documentation of contacts with parents, impressions of students, and information about students' school and home situations. An evaluator coded qualitative data from mentors' anecdotal observations and compared these with quantitative scores to support validity of self esteem, drug use, study habits, and student achievement data.

A pretest-posttest comparison group design was implemented, where it was workable, to determine program effectiveness. Comparison groups were identified in three participating districts by guidance counselors who identified additional high risk youth similar to participants. Fifty-one youngsters in comparison groups took the same end-of-year tests as targeted youth.

Peer group relations were rated by mentors on a seven-point scale and through structured interviews and observations.

The school form of the Coopersmith Inventory was used to assess students' self esteem.

Students' attitudes and use of alcohol and other drugs were assessed by a questionnaire on substance abuse developed by the New York State Division of Substance Abuse.

Students' study skills were assessed by a questionnaire developed for this program. Participation and progress were examined through qualitative data. Achievement was assessed by report card grades in English, social studies, mathematics, and science; and by standardized test scores.

Results

Nassau BOCES developed and maintained partnerships with the four participating school districts and with various community-based social service providers. Administrative procedures regarding articulation procedures for program staff, school administrators, mentors, tutors, and participating youth were established and communicated. The disciplinary practice of imposing detention was modified so as not to obstruct mentor-student contact time. Systematized referral of students to social and psychological services and development of a school committee concerned with learning problems were program components that were institutionalized by program completion.

Although districts differed in ratings of administrative support, mentors generally viewed district and program administrators as supportive and facilitative, particularly as the program matured.

At the outset, records were unavailable for various reasons. One district was involved in asbestos-removal; others lacked articulation between elementary and middle schools; another was reluctant to share information despite repeated assurances that confidentiality would be respected. Problems obtaining data eased over time.

Parent participation, student absenteeism, and difficulty in obtaining additional social services for youngsters were persistent challenges to the program.

Results follow for the various program initiatives: mentoring, parental involvement, self esteem and relationships, AOD attitudes and use, study skills and academic achievement.

Mentoring

Differences between mentors and schools in the amount and type of data supplied suggested a deficiency of reliability in mentor records. In an effort to achieve consistency in methods of observing participants and of recording data, mentors were trained in maintaining factual, objective records.

According to surveys collected at completion of workshops and seminars, mentor trainings in intervention strategies and assessment methods were relevant and helpful.

Mentors reported that curriculum guides implementing strategic teaching and learning procedures in social studies, language arts, and health were integrated in their groups and classrooms.

As documented by referrals to external social service agencies, mentors successfully served as advocates for youth and their families

Mentors indicated that they achieved high levels of bonding with the students. The mentors reported, also, that bonding with one another and personal growth strengthened their commitments to their students and to the program. These results were consistent for mentor groups and schools despite differences in levels of participation (ranging from daily to once a week) and numbers of activities conducted by mentors. These reports were supported by the low rate of turnover; of just four mentors who left the program over a five-year period, only one left because of poor job performance.

Mentors believed that the program should have included more mentor group in-school meetings, more rap sessions, more speakers, and less paperwork. They believed that sports participation programs may have strengthened both student and parent involvement.

Parental Involvement

Participation in family activities, negligible at first, improved over time. Parents came out in full force to attend their youngsters' performances and the end-of-school-year barbecue.

High contact with parents was not necessarily associated with a nurturant family environment; sometimes it meant that a youngster was having problems within the school.

Known attitudes of 82 percent of the parents indicated that parents had generally positive attitudes towards the program.

Self Esteem and Relationships

Students' attitudes were documented through interviews with mentors and culled from school records. In 1994, more than 90 percent of the students had positive relations with mentors; 76 percent had positive attitudes towards school staff (consisting primarily of teachers); and 65 percent demonstrated positive behaviors towards school staff. Students related more positively to the mentors than to other adults in the schools.

Students who demonstrated the most positive peer group attitudes on a mentor rating scale were from a district which reported high level of gang activity. More valid indicators of students' trust and concern for one another and of relationships between adolescents and adults (mentors and other teachers) were observed in students' behaviors within mentor groups, in activities between districts, and during the summer experience.

Highly positive evaluations of the summer program (the precollege residency and environmental experiences) by mentors and by environmental educators indicated that students perceived these experiences as well-organized and that students were encouraged to aspire to a college education. The summer program promoted highly positive relationships and behaviors.

No differences were found on pretests and posttests of experimental and comparison groups on the self esteem measure.

AOD Attitudes and Use

A substance abuse questionnaire which was administered to eighth graders in health classes did not yield useful data because it did not elicit variance in response. Asked to indicate whether they used alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, and if yes, how frequently, students responded "No" to all questions even though pains were taken to assure students of anonymity and confidentiality. A test of refusal skills was not administered.

Study Skills and Academic Achievement

A test of preservice teachers' knowledge indicated that awareness regarding multicultural education and teaching study skills increased after training. Although more than 200 teacher candidates were trained, few who initially volunteered to tutor actually served because of differences in the university and school schedules. The tutorial program, although implemented in a modified and limited scale, was rated positively by both preservice teachers and by mentors.

No differences were observed in high risk youths' pretest and posttest scores or between the scores of the experimental and comparison groups in study skills.

Although grades assigned by teachers in different subjects and in different school districts probably were not comparable, improvement or decline from one year to the next was assumed to be tenable. Thus, academic achievement of at-risk students was evidenced by increase in number of students who passed to the next grade level.

By the third implementation year, standardized test scores indicated that the experimental group had gained one year in math; the comparison group had made no gain.

Discussion

The teacher-mentor component of the program, demonstrating the use of teachers to implement AOD prevention activities and including an educational and recreational summer program, was the program's major strength. Efforts dedicated to training and support of the mentors resulted in positive outcomes for the participating youngsters as bonding and trust developed within the groups, mentees become aware of their strengths, and mentor groups became a "safe haven."

Greater emphasis on qualitative evaluation would have been useful in documenting some of the real but elusive changes which were not captured in quantitative data. Researchers recognize that many current methodologies and instruments are "incompatible and culturally insensitive to the nuances of interactions and processes that occur in ... ethnic minority communities" (Isaacs and Benjamin, 1991, p. 41). Particularly because validity of standardized tests as measures in evaluation of such a complex program was questionable, and also as the program did not address specific difficulties associated with use of standardized tests to assess self esteem, AOD attitudes and use, and academic achievement of African American youngsters, attention to case studies would have been appropriate.

In fact, the external evaluator and program staff supported the need for both qualitative and quantitative data. Anecdotal data were collected, but because narratives were coded and reduced to numbers, they were stripped of their strength to describe human change.

As players in this program from inception to culmination, the authors testify to mentors', students', and parents' increasing enthusiasm and commitment to the program and to their accounts of personal development - growth of trust, development of friendship, increased sense of community, enhanced self confidence, and expanded hope. Participants attributed these ambiguous - but real - human qualities to having been part of the program. These data were not captured in the endeavor to quantify pre-defined outcomes.

Undeniably, inherent tension exists in the need for empirical statistical data to promote comparability across studies and in the capacity of anecdotal narrative to describe indefinite concepts related to the human experience. Balance between quantitative and qualitative evaluation would need to be attained to denote impact achieved by a complex program endeavoring to accomplish human change.

Note: Statistical data and comprehensive evaluation reports for Project Support are available from the Division of Instructional Programs and Services of Nassau BOCES, Salisbury Center, Westbury, NY and from the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services, Rockville, MD.

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